BASSANIO

or

The English Haiku

by H. J. Isaacson

"That light we see is burning in my hall.
How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

---The Merchant of Venice
Act V Scene 1

Dedicated to

Dean Clara W. Mayer

with a never sufficiently expressed gratitude.

Your spontaneous bravery of spirit sponsored these studies in spight of whatever grumblings arose about them.

This haiku is meant to indicate the riddle of contriving a university catalogue.

Across the golf links
Spring mist ya Dandelions
and purple clover.

Preface

It was many years ago now, (say seventeen for a book of haiku), that a graduate school in New York City, old fashioned enough to be adventurous without being glassey-eyed about it, asked me to give courses elucidative of the haiku.

For several years these continued and various persons were brave enough to undertake such a difficult thing -- to try to understand the haiku and then to explore the establishing of it in English.

The original haiku they contrived have lain by in a box for a long while. From this the bulk of this little book is compiled.

They're a brave-hearted attempt, though they are not quite haiku yet. Why should one bother to print them? Because they are on the true road to the real haiku and are the furthest advance in this direction achieved in English so far.

And as they do indeed bear towards that distant land there is an intrinsic uniqueness about them. They contain, they exude, the spirit of an inexpressible and an inexhaustible youth so vast as to reveal solar systems and universes as petty paper peep-shows by comparison.

In the current situation of maundering decrepitude in American, in Western life, when the so-called young people are the most wrinkled-faced, wheezy-voiced segment of the population, it was felt that the

immense potential towards liberation from this contained here could be of too much value not to be put forward.

To furnish some foot-hold for comparison here are two Japanese haiku of the year 1934 Englished:

The moon reflects;
the two islands,
in the space between them kana
--Shikō

A lightning-bolt ya
All clustered together,
farmers' houses.
--Hakuya

As to just who wrote each haiku that follows, one can't say exactly any longer. However they were written by the persons whose names follow (set down in alphabetical order).

Keith Austin
Saville Clarke
Phoebe Douglas
Shigeko Kishi
William Pinckard
Eleanor Wolff

As Basho's haiku says:

An Otsu-e
for his the-brush-begins;
what Tathagata?

To this he appended the words:

"On Day Four of the New Year." And so my deep respect for these persons who in the humdrum drone of the Godless Month brought forward from where it was embodied within them the True Month's presence of things as they really are.

SPRING

1

This afternoon
Kanzan and Jitoku both,
are Spring mist.

Kanzan and Jitoku--two mad Buddhist monks of ancient China, much referred to in the Sung flowering of the Ch'en school.

2.

The Great Gateway;
to the South cherry trees,
to the North are cherries.

3.

The tokonoma's
cherry-branch ya while taking a nap
two petals fell.

In the finest room of a Japanese house is an alcove called tokonoma where a painting or an example of calligraphy may be hung, and a piece of ceramics or a flower arrangement put. The drollness of this ku lies in the fact that the master of the household, in an interval between guests, perhaps, must have dropped off to sleep in this not-exactly appropriate room.

4

An old cherry tree;
even out its trunk sprout
sakura kana

sakura -- a name for the cherry tree and its flower.

5 Kuniyoshi tipsy
and the geisha's dumpling face;
flower-view kana

Kuniyoshi--a great master of the ukiyo-e school, it dates this ku as in some springtime of the 1850's.

6 Spring wind ya
The letter-carrier starts to run
down a green hill.

7 Spring rain.
At the end of a long afternoon
the sweet-meats seller's cry.

8 By the notice-board
for country Kabuki,
a frog croaks keri

9 Scattered cherries,
a vista of flooded ricefields,
sound of frogs.

This ku seems a little askew in its time, but understand the ricefields to mean paddy fields where the rice plants have not yet been transplanted, and the cherry trees to be late-flowering cherries.

10 Chill night ya
the charcoal-fed hibachi lion's
Spring moon

hibachi--a large bowl in which lighted charcoals are put. The main source of warmth in the old-style Japanese house. From long ago a form of hibachi has been with three legs, each one held in the mouth of a lion's head.

11 SUMMER

The gold carp
in mid-air catches food
first thunder kana

One of the carp kept in the garden pond.

12 The clam's dream;
as we rowed toward it,
first thunder kana

The clam's dream--a name given to a sort of sea mirage observed in certain places near the coast of China and Japan. A large mass, like a mountain, or a cluster of buildings, seems to rise up on the surface of the ocean.

13 Back and forth
over a puddle in the road,
butterfly kana

14 Its twistedness
fish use as a stairway;
fuji no hana

fuji no hana--fuji is the wisteria vine; no hana--in flower.

15 Over the mountain,
a fuji spray carried in hand
she comes keri

She probably picked the fuji somewhere on the mountain. Vines of wild fuji, often clasp round some old pine tree, flower in the early summer.

16 Start of summer ya
where two roads meet
the stone Jizo.

Jizo--the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha who has the aspect of a Buddhist monk. Smallish statues of him in stone are placed by roadsides.

17 On the peonies
its fresh water clings kori
May-time rain.

18 A white rooster
scratches among white petals ya
Farm peonies.

19 Sudden downpour;
before the shoji is closed
scent of peonies.

shoji--the paper walls on a sliding wooden frame that divide the Japanese room from the outdoors.

20 Puddles and puddles;
everywhere reflected are
young leaves kana

21 An old plank bridge
there people meet to talk about
wild irises kana

22 Wild irises.
In bud a brush, and opened out
Korin kana

The painter Korin--who so mastered the painting of wild irises that his name is as one with that flower.

23 Tumble-down house.
only the swallows come and go,
kakitsubata.

kakitsubata--the wild iris.

24 From a plank bridge,
she fishes for a hairpin,
kakitsubata.

25 Deep mountain;
the bijin eyebrows go up keri
hototogisu.

hototogisu-- a form of the cuckoo. bijin--is the Japanese term for a beautiful woman.

26 The world is dew.
Out of the abandoned mansion comes
a flying ant.

27 Roadside discourse.
At both ends of the bridge
wheat's Autumn.

Roadside discourse--a dharma discourse offered on the roadway to people in general by a Buddhist monk.

28 The fire-grate's
appearance is cool,
white fan kana

29 Dusk zashiki ya
From the greengrocer a fan,
from tofu a fan.

zashiki--the sitting room of a Japanese house, where guests are received. It is customary for Japanese stores to give customers round paper fans for the summer time, these usually have the store's name on them.
tofu--means the man who makes and sells the tofu, or bean curd.

30 In an instant
the beggar bought ice-cream;
heat kana

in an instant--just as soon as someone gave him a few pennies.

31 Under tangerine trees
a ghost-fire drifts ya
the Summer moon.

32 When the horseman passed
b bullfrog stuck his head out of
the Summer moon.

33 Sudden downpour
streams upon the glass roof of
the greenhouse kana

34 Sword stroke ya
the roof's sudden downpour,
master's face

People practicing in an academy of sword-play.

35 The fishing village
its seaweed-wrapped rice,
Summer coolness kana

36 Just at midnight
it lights up a jewelled comb,
firefly kana

AUTUMN

37 Very fitting,
the evening glories'
gourds kana

38 Lightning ya
From his own house
he starts back.

39 Momiji color;
by the sunset
it is stolen.

momiji--the autumn tinted leaves of the Japanese maple tree.

40 Mountain pass.
the moon underfoot, across it
wild geese kana

41 Rain clouds above;
wild-geese too have stopped beside
the wine-shop kana

42 November gale ya
the boy monk sweeps the hall's
persimmon leaves.

WINTER

43 While drawing water
from the well, it came;
arare kana

arare--hail.

44 Rain becomes snow
between persimmons and globe-fish;
temple umbrella kana

globe-fish--the fuzu, a fish considered delicious in winter.

45 Snow scenery.
a barge goes down the river;
set-up kotatsu

kotatsu--a wooden framework with lighted charcoal inside it. A quilt is put over it and one sits there to keep warm on a winter's day.

46 Bamboo engawa,
brushwood sleeve-fence ya
Powdery snow.

engawa--the veranda sort of runway about a Japanese house. Usually made of planks of good timber, but sometimes of bamboo.

Sleeve-fence--A short fence used in Japanese gardens to cut off the view of some part of the house from the garden.

47 Suisen ya
the children are making
a snow Daruma.

Suisen--Chinese narcissus, or paper-white. A bulb plant that flowers in the winter.
Daruma--In Japanese the name of the Thera Bhodhidarma. A snow Daruma means what we call a snowman.

48 The courtesan
arranging paper-whites;
snowbound kana

49 Winter-bound.
Faded out of mind,
the drunken neighbor.

There follow some English haiku by the compiler. They have somewhat too didactic a tone, it seems to me, but that is partly intended.

First sunrise ya
The not-ever seen-before they show,
the dales and the downs.

Into the tin cup
fell the toothpaste cap# ya
Springtime-water dawns.

Ideas swept away,
such a haunting, boisterous sound ya
Ravine's Spring wind.

For a Lady Who Paints Chinese Paintings

Hundred Monkeys?--W-e-l-l,
Hundred Cows? --No. -- The garden's
Hundred Butterflies.

The peonies are
curry-powder color ya
Yew-tree shapes.

The io holds up
but a snake's slough jars from the roof ya
Cicada voices.

io--a house so simple one could make it oneself, the abodes of sages liberated from worldly error.

Old museum ya
To the Egyptian rooms no one comes,
Cicada voices.

In the foot-palm folds
any number of sand grains;
a Summer ocean.

A mountain bus ya
Back and forth it threads across
the Summer river.

From the horns to the melons
black butterfly drifts ya
Mountain path ox-cart.

As Autumn mist clears
lightly colored leaves come out,
the insect voices.

Double Nine; the desk
adornment; looks a long climb---
jade mountain kana

Double Nine--the festival of the Ninth day, Ninth Month in the Chinese lunar calendar. Indicative of the fruition of scholarly studies, the observance is to climb to a high place on some mountain.

After Moon, no guest;
the wife's face reddened with drink
looks black by moonlight.

The Year Moon is 15th day 8th Month of the lunar calendar. In Japan they also celebrate what is termed the After Moon, the 13th day of the 9th Month.

"Could one set him free?"
the caged lion's viewer thinks;
it icy showers.

The second wave's white
rolls over the former wave,
Winter gale kana

"Ah! this bally day
must it jolly well be done?"
Soot Riddance

Soot Riddance--the 13th day of the 12th Month, when the whole house is turned thoroughly upside down to clean it for the coming New Year.

Talk over sake.
Tonight the snow-phoenix's tail,
morning-- uguisu.

sake-- Japanese rice wine.
uguisu-- a small bird of beautiful song. For the Chinese and Japanese the equivalent of the nightingale.

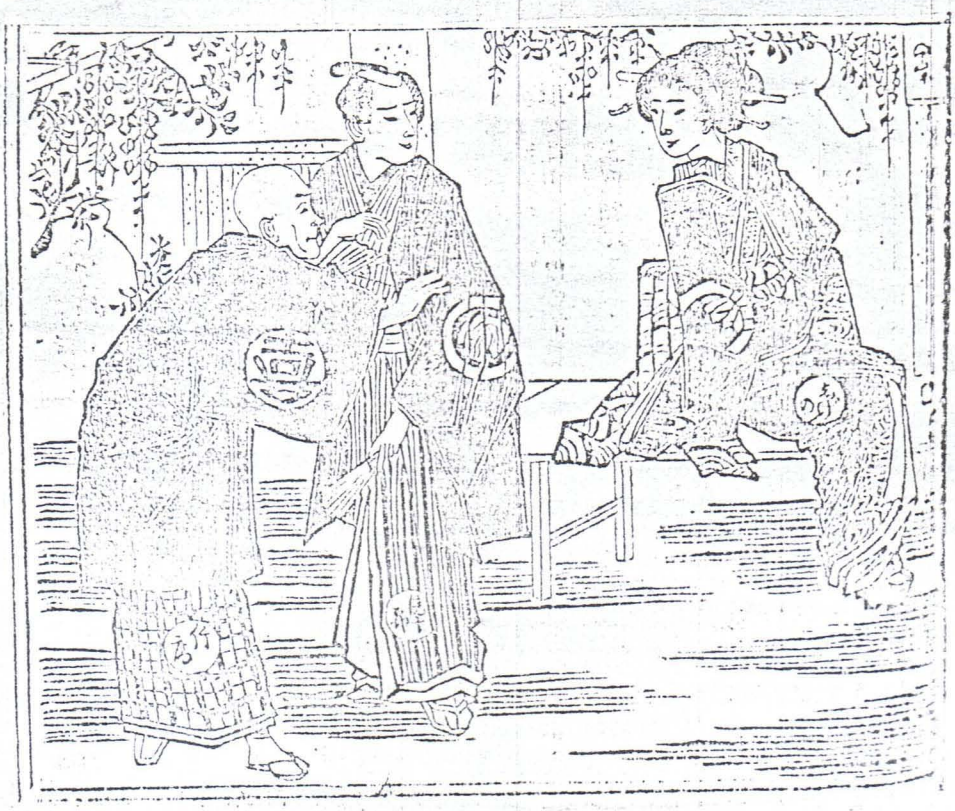
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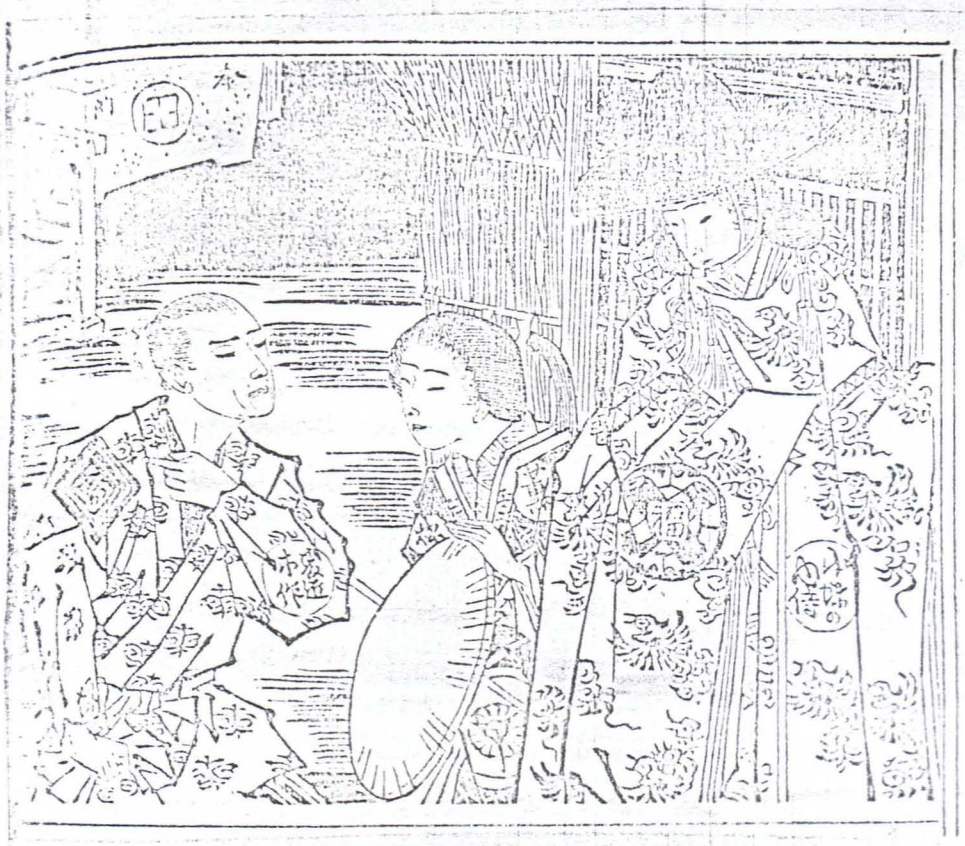
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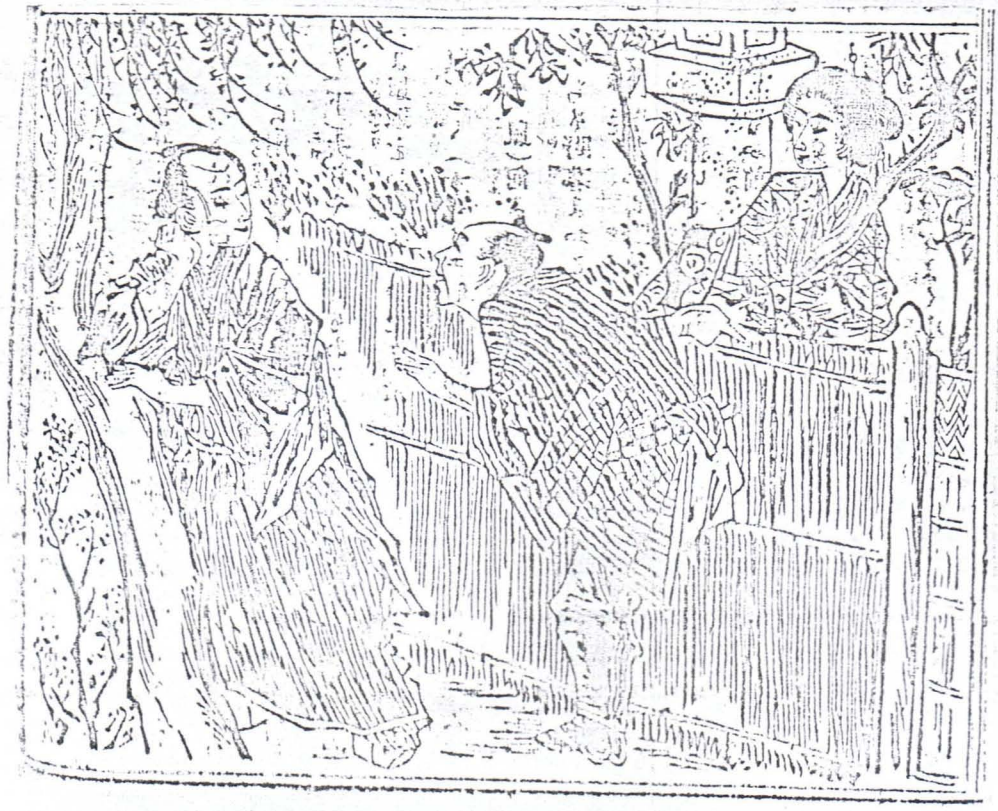
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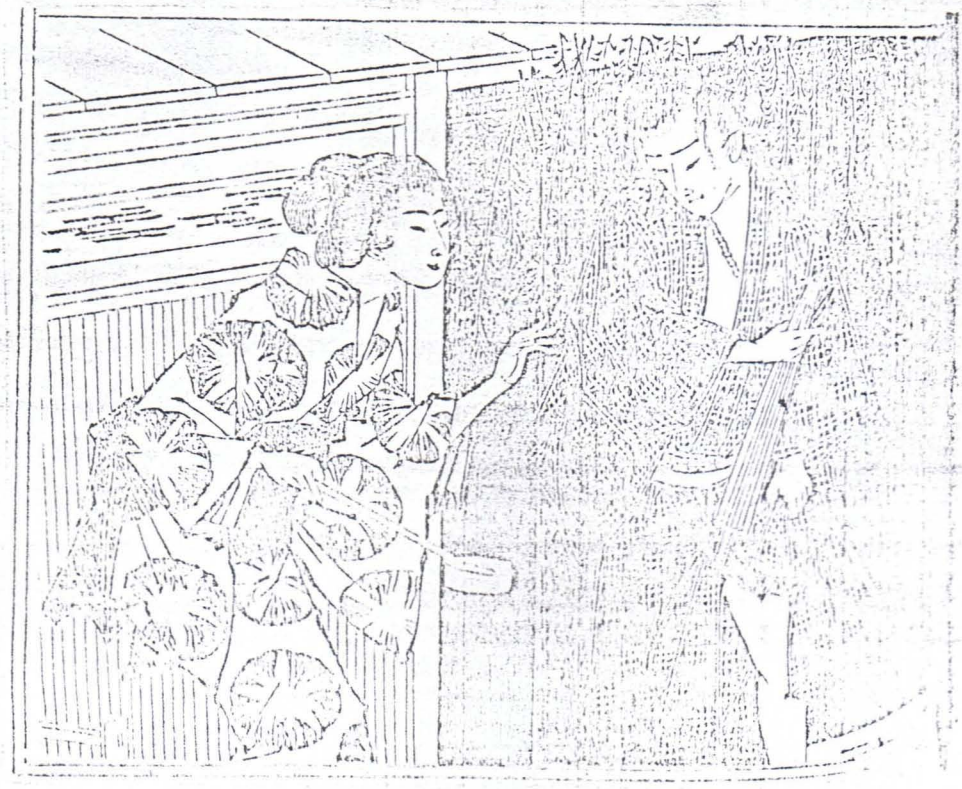
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By #41



At the end of the book

